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No hatchet job on U.S. intelligence

by Fred Rodell

AMERICA CAN'T AFFORD another hatchet job on U.S. intelligence.

The Reagan administration, the Congress, the media and soon a special prosecutor are launching a series of full-scale investigations of the Iran-contra affair; but let us not forget or lose sight of the fact that terrorism and espionage still go on as does the spread of communism.

We must caution our new Congress, in its quest for truth in this matter, and in tightening the operations of the various agencies within the government in order to prevent future transgressions, not to paralyze the effectiveness of our intelligence apparatus by reverting to additional oversight committees. In the years preceding the Reagan administration, the CIA had to be accountable to eight congressional committees for its activities. Since each of these committees had staffs, perhaps hundreds of individuals were privy to secrets. Even intelligence agencies of friendly countries became reluctant to cooperate with us, out of fear of exposure.

Returning to this type of oversight system would be self-destructive.

The president now has a new national security adviser, Frank Carlucci, to oversee the National Security Council staff, where things apparently went wrong. The NSC is staffed by a number of civilians and officers from the various services who should have been under the direction of the president's national security adviser. It remains to be seen if they were.

Undoubtedly, these individuals are highly intelligent, patriotic people. Unfortunately, in their quest to do only the best for their country, they achieved the exact opposite in the Iran-contra affair. They thought themselves to be above the law while engaging in activities far beyond their authorized scope of operation.

There was the affair where NSC staff members engaged in the logistical organizing on behalf of the Nicaraguan contras, perhaps in violation of U.S. laws and also the intention of our Congress, which clearly excludes government participation in activities of this type.

Next came the revelation of NSC involvement in arms shipments to Iran and the transfer of certain funds to the contras in Nicaragua.

The new Congress will be faced with a major problem created by this latest fiasco: namely that the much-needed help to those fighting communism in the Orient, in Africa, in our own backyard in Nicaragua, will be overshadowed or forgotten.

This must not occur. Our commitment to the contras and others must be firm or the cancer of communism will spread both south and north until it reaches our own southern border.

Congress should be aware that any changes of and adding to the congressional statutory oversight committees, as set up in early 1980 under amendments to the National Security Act, would virtually amount to the destruction of our much-needed intelligence system.

A viable and effective intelligence organization, as is in place today, is the nation's first line of defense. Only when our leaders know what the military, political and economic capabilities or intentions of our adversaries are, can they make intelligent decisions.

Rodell, who lives in Houston, served in the Office of Strategic Services during World War II and is president of the Texas chapter of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.